

Wreckers and Workers of Old Key West

by Betty Brothers

Authentic Pictures Restored by J. F. Brooks



Old Chart, circa 1850, showing "Key West" or "Thompson's Island."



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Edited by Bern R. Brothers

FIRST PRINTING 1972

SECOND PRINTING 1974

HAND BOUND BY SARAH CALKINS OF BIG PINE KEY

For Bern Brothers and all
the Splendid Conchs who
made this book possible.

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May God have mercy upon us all.
July, 1, 2020

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OLD ISLAND - FIRST REAL ESTATE SALES

Key West, with its fresh water holes, was a mecca for pirates. Indians came and went. Wild animals, such as raccoon, lived there, and brightly colored migratory birds used it as a stopover. But no man owned Key West.

First actual title to the Old Island was granted when the Spanish Government gave Juan P. Salas a land grant, dated August 26, 1815.

Six years passed before Senor Salas found a buyer for his land. On December 20, 1821, Juan P. Salas issued a deed of conveyance to John W. Simonton. This title was good, guaranteed by the treaty of February 22, 1819, between the United States and Spain. A board of commissioners, which had been set up to review all land transactions, and determine validity of title, recommended confirmation of the grant from Spain to Salas, and the conveyance from Salas to Simonton. Thus, the Congress of the United States approved these first real estate sales, the 23rd of May, 1828.

John W. Simonton was the first man to improve the Old Island. He laid out a plan of a town. Under his direction, storehouses and other buildings were erected. He made preparations to manufacture salt at the natural salt ponds. He imported sheep and hogs. He set up a rude lumbering mill, which produced several hundred cords of wood, held for ready sale.

Wasting no time, he charted the deep harbor of Key West, and in 1822, he attempted to interest the United States Navy in using Key West as a harbor.

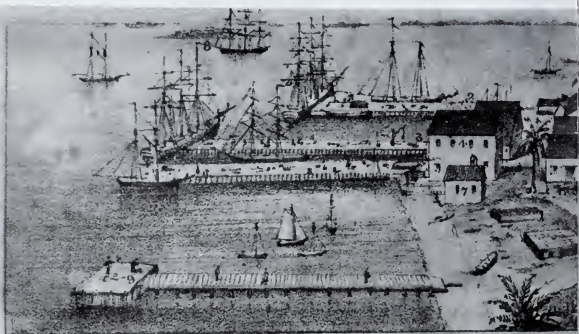
In March, 1822, Lieutenant M. C. Perry, on orders of the Navy Department, sailed the schooner Shark into the great natural harbor of Key West, and planted the standard of the United States on Old Island soil.



1. Whiteheads Point. 2. Light-house. 3. Old Grave Yard. 4. Residence of
8. Whitehead Street. 9. Caroline Street. 10. Residence of A. Gordon. 11. C
14. House begun by Judge Webb, unfinished. 15. Residence of Judge Marvin. 16. Res

KEY:

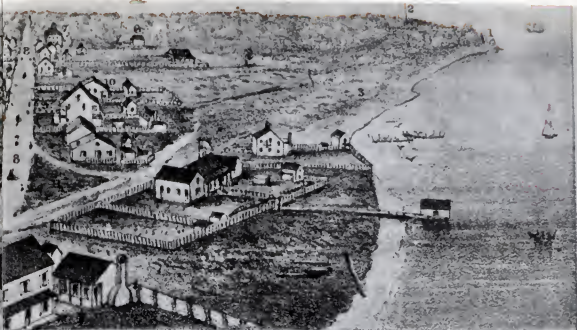
Looking South-East. Reduced from a pencil sketch by W. A. Whitehead



1. U. S. Military Cantonment. 2. Warehouse and Wharf of F. A. Browne. 3. Warehouses and Wharf of
8. Fleming's Key and Naval Anchorage. 9. Turtle, Crab and Fish Mar

THE BUSI
KEY

Looking North. Reduced from a pencil sketch by W. A. Whitehead



1. A. Browne. 5. Custom House and Collector's Residence. 6 Jail. 7. Court House.
 10. Union Place. 12. Front Street. 13. Foot-bridge across Pond on the line of Duval Street.
 14. Residences of P. J. Fontane and Patterson, (one behind the other.) 17. Residence of Mr. Weaver.

WEST.

Taken from the Cupola of the Warehouse of Messrs. A. C. Tift & Co., June 1838.



1. C. Greene. 4. Warehouses and Wharf of O. O'Hara. 5. Duval Street. 6. Front Street. 7. Fire Engine House.
 8. 10. Blacksmiths Shop. 11. Tops of Cocoa Nuts North of the Warehouse.

WEST PART OF

WEST.

Taken from the Cupola of the Warehouse of Messrs. A. C. Tift & Co., June 1838.

OLD ISLAND - FIRST REAL ESTATE SALES

In November, 1822, Captain D. T. Patterson, under order, sounded the watery depths, and surveyed the land adjacent to the harbor. He sent his report to the Naval Department.

December, 1822, House of Representatives called on President to "inform the House what appropriation will be required to enable him to fortify Thompson's Island, usually called Key West, and whether a naval depot established at that island, protected by fortifications, will not afford facilities in defending the commerce of the U. S. and in clearing the Gulf of Mexico, and the adjacent seas of pirates... "

By February 1st, 1823, the Secretary of the Navy sent orders to Commodore David Porter, who was commanding the squadron on the West India station, to "Establish at Thompson's Island, usually called Key West, a depot, and to land the ordnance and marines to protect the stores and provisions. "

By April 23, 1823, Commodore Porter reported that: He "had built storehouses, landed stores at Key West and had collected all the schooners of the squadron, and stationed them at different points about Cuba. "

According to Mr. Cabell, February 9, 1848, in a report to the House of Representatives, Thirtieth Congress, :

"The conduct of this officer (Commodore Porter) seems to have been arbitrary, unjust and tyrannical. Government storehouses and other buildings were erected, without reference to the wishes of the proprietors of the island. The plan of their buildings and the arrangement of their town lots were disregarded. They were not permitted to dispose of their own lands, or even to occupy it themselves, except by toleration and favor of the commanding officer of the United States naval forces. Without their consent, licenses were granted to others to occupy and build upon their lots. They were not even permitted to enlarge their own warehouse. In short, the most arbitrary military rule existed on the island. The proprietors were dispossessed of their property, and were deprived of the profits they reasonably anticipated from the use of it, and from the sale of their town lots. They were not suffered to execute their purpose of manufacturing salt. The cord wood, cut and prepared



U. S. MARINE HOSPITAL FROM THE WATER.



THE SALT POND ROAD.



TIFT S



WHARF.



Key West.



Q. S. PARKER'S RESIDENCE.



Parish, Cuba, 1890.

OLD ISLAND - FIRST REAL ESTATE SALES

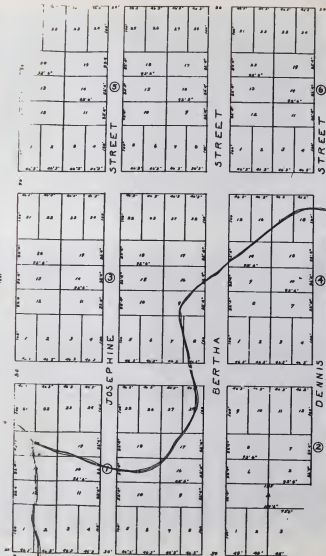
for sale, was seized and appropriated to the use of those in the employment of the United States; and, in consequence of the orders of Commodore Porter, their stock of sheep and hogs was destroyed..

The absolute occupation of the whole island by the United States continued for more than three years, and of part of it for a much longer time.



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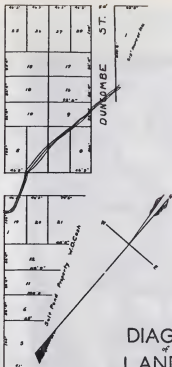


DIAGRAM LAND TRACT NO.30

Containing 21 Acres -
Belonging to
W. D. Cash, Esq.

Surveyed
by
Drawn
From

Map of W. A. Whitehead dated 1829,

Key West Fla By

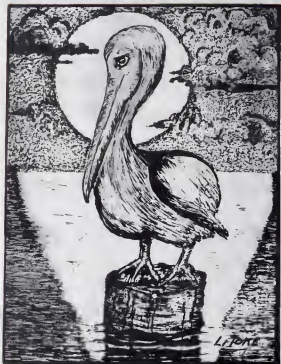
March 8th 1887.

T. J. Ashe,
Deputy Co. Surveyor

Summary of Lots

Approx. - 20
- 21 20
- 4 21
- 2 22
- 6 23

Total 74 1/2 Lots



SPONGER MONEY

"Sponger Money, never done...

Spon--ger Mon---ey!

Cigar Maker's on the bum...

Sponger Mon-----ey!

Look in th' closet fo cloes and shoes...

Sponger Mon-----ey!

We's got money fo' wine and booze...

Sponger Mon-----ey!



Sponger Money, the old forgotten folk song of Key West, tells us of the time when the Sponger was the king of the old island's economy. And yet, being the individualist that he was and is, the Conch Sponger sold his hard earned wares for one third what the Greek Spongers obtained for their harvest from the sea. For the Conch Sponger never organized to take advantage of the market. Whereas the Greeks organized, and kept their sponges off the market when prices were too low.

The Conch Sponger used a three pronged hook, about four inches in width, attached to a pine pole about an inch and an eighth in diameter and at least fourteen feet long. (Several years ago, the legal limit was raised to a minimum of five inches in diameter for every sponge taken, so the old three pronged hook was outlawed, and a new four pronged hook with a five inch spread was declared legal.) Thus, the sponger could see at a glance whether a sponge was legal size.

The Conch Sponger operated in a small skiff, easily poled about. A glass bottom bucket enabled him to see into the depths of the



Young Fleet, Key West, Fla.

SPONGER MONEY

remarkably clear waters that surround the Florida Keys. When the surface of the sea might be too ruffled for visibility, he poured his oil on troubled water, and created a smooth slick, so that he might peer down in search of the black blobs that are living, wool sponges. He might work alone, or he might cooperate with five or six other men in dinghys.

In days gone by, only shark oil, which was boiled out of huge shark livers, was used to clear the water. For a young Nurse Shark, six feet long, might yield four to six gallons of oil. The men would drag the shark up on shore, and cook it in a five gallon can, over an open fire. The sawfish, a near cousin of the shark, also was a source of oil. If the men weren't fortunate enough to catch their own sharks and make their own oil, they went to the hardware store, and bought a gallon of shark oil, which someone else had labored to render. The price was \$1.00 per gallon, either from the Works or from the store.

The Sponger put a stick into his oil, and switched it over the top of the water, for a distance of two hundred feet. Then, he might have good visibility for half an hour. (Shark oil is a thing of the past now, and the modern Sponger has substituted a mixture of linseed oil, bacon grease, corn oil. But these are not nearly as good as the shark oil of yore.)

The Sponger, whether he lived and operated in days gone by, when no synthetic sponges depressed the market for his wares, or whether he ekes out a precarious existence now by meeting the limited demand for natural sponges, paid dearly in sweat and time for his livelihood. Yet, he also wrung great satisfaction out of his occupation, for the crystal clear ocean shows its beauty (in gracefully waving sea fans, brightly colored fishes, pulsating jelly fish, and mountainous coral heads) to nature lovers who glide across the surface of the sea.

Wielding his pole to shove his cockleshell of a craft over the sponge beds; directing his 14 feet to 18 feet long handled sponge hook down over a choice sponge on the ocean floor; keeping his temperamental outboard motor running: were just part of the battle to bring sponges to market. For the natural sheepswool sponge,



KEY WEST SPONGE FLEET—THE BIGHT.



SPONGING.



SPONGE PROCESSING.

SPONGER MONEY

which is the best grade in the American market, is a toughly cloaked, black blob, that smells very strongly of rotten garlic. Several days work is needed to finish it for sale. In the summer it is put overboard for twenty-four hours. It is protected from the rays of the sun. Then it is beaten or washed or both. It is then returned to the sea, and the black tenacious skin decomposes into a black gelatin which slides away into the water, leaving the brownish-cream colored skeleton, which we, the public, know as sponge.

Every sponger has his favorite club, generally one of about two feet, four inches wide, with an inch and a half handle. Of pine or fir, it is five-eighths inch in thickness.

The sponger buys his hook and his needle, both of which are hand-forged by a blacksmith of Key West. The hook costs five dollars. The needle, which is sixteen to eighteen inches in length, costs from one dollar to a dollar and a half. The needle is used to string sponges on sisal binder twine to the ancient "string" of sponges, measuring fifty-six inches in length. The wholesaler stops by to see strings of sponges, and offers about ten dollars to twelve dollars for each string. The broker then must get a higher price. The spongers speculate that sponges are still used in the packing boxes of submarines, and as surgical sponges in the operating rooms, and ground up to make the fibers in paper money. The natural sponge, if kept out of sunlight, which degrades it, will outlast many synthetics.

The sheepswool, the best grade, is followed by the yellow sponge and the grass sponge. The grass sponge is wiry enough to be used by Conchs as pot scrapers. However, it is not as long lasting as the sheepswool. The spongers have many names for different looking sponges: loggerhead (woody, and easily decomposed, it has no commercial use, however, one chemist has found that it does contain some remarkable long chain alcohols.); fire sponge, bright orange red, is useful only in torturing skin divers, for it produces an itch that is really lively; potato sponges, hog sponges, rag sponges, rolling sponges (still living, but torn up from the holdfasts), travelling sponges, silk sponges, and glove sponges. Loggerhead sponges grow to fantastic sizes as big as dining room tables. Grass sponges have been found that measure three feet in diameter and two feet in height.

SPONGER MONEY

But sheepswool sponges are never permitted by man to attain any great growth. A foot in diameter is about tops for wool sponges.

There have been sponge blights and sponge wars in the past.

In 1939, a sponge blight occurred. Mr. T. Keys cast back in his memory to describe this happening.

"It was in April, and the water was clear as gin. The sponge we pulled in smelled funny. By May, when we returned to the same place, the sponges were all dead, and cleaned. All we had to do was hook them off the bottom, shake them out, and beat the mud out of them. They were dead, and no little crabs, no worms, no fish, nothing came tumbling out when we pulled the sponge off the bottom. The fish were all dead, the turtle, the little sharks (didn't see any big sharks), the conchs were dead, the stone crabs were dead. The only sponges that didn't get killed were the sea caps, and the logger-heads, and I don't think that I saw any crawfish dead, but I can't tell, it's been so long ago. There wasn't market for crawfish in them days, you know. But, everything was gone, and the waters were so clear, and they sparkled like never before."

From several sources, I have learned about the sponge wars. They should more properly be called skirmishes, for although on three different occasions, Greek boats were burned to their water line, on y a handful of men, three to six in number, were involved. About 1916, one such battle was joined, for the Conchs were bitter that the Greeks with their large boats and lead shod helmet divers were cleaning out the sponge beds, their only livelihood. Once a Conch boat took out after a Greek boat, with intent to kill. But, the Greek boat had both power and sail, and easily outran the Conch boat, which was a sail boat. The Greeks finally tired of the inhospitable treatment which was being meted out to them, for they couldn't dock at Key West to buy supplies, without running the risk of losing a boat, or having a crewman injured. Yet, the Conchs were only trying to protect their territorial rights. They had come the hard way from the Carolinas to the Bahamas, where they had almost starved, and then finally to Key West, and the Keys. This was their land, their islands, and they meant to keep them, inviolate for themselves.

SPONGER MONEY

The Greeks, too, were an island people, tough, tenacious, used to risking their lives in jousts with the sea for a bare living. So, they recognized the island tenacity and courage of the Conchs and sailed away to the mainland of Florida, where they established a successful sponge capitol at Tarpon Springs.

"Sponger Money, never done...

Spon---ger Mon---ey!"

It was a rollicking song, a gay song, a proud song. But, now it is a long forgotten song. And the prosperous times for the sponge fishermen are gone. There are still a very few men who make their living by simply following the old ways. They work long hours, and they work hard. And being older men, their wants are few and simple.



SHARKS WERE BOILED DOWN FOR SHARK OIL. SPONGERS SCATTERED THIS SHARK OIL ON THE OCEAN, SO THEY COULD SEE THE SPONGES.



THE WRECKERS

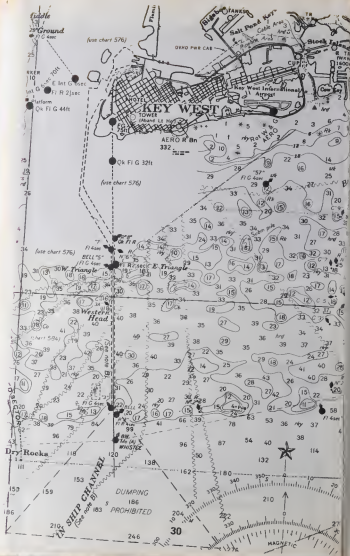
To understand the Wreckers of Key West, you must know the secrets of the coral reefs which guard the Atlantic shores of the Florida Keys.

The reefs lie between the tiny tropical isles and the mighty Gulf Stream. Built by almost invisible animals, the reefs may exist as great walls which mount from the ocean floor to the surface of the sea. Where exposed to the air, the coral animal colonies die, and the reef top is worn down by the scouring action of the waves. Sometimes a single column of coral will rise in majestic splendor. All of these hard corals will rip the bottom out of a boat or ship, luckless enough to pass over them. Unless characteristic yellow color or a white plumed breaking wave betrays the presence of a reef, it is difficult to tell where the coral is located, and at what depth. A coral reef may be two feet below the surface, and look as if it lies deeply, at thirty feet. It may be twenty feet down, and look as if it is just below the surface of the water.

A fairyland to the skindiver, a haven for the gaudy fish, crabs, and mollusks, the reef is a terror to the sailor.

The poorly drawn charts, and inadequate navigation instruments conspired with the fact that sailing vessels were very much at the mercy of wind and wave. The Florida Keys were the graveyard for many a noble ship of the 1800's.

Proceeding in a Southerly manner, a ship had to skirt the pulsing current of the great Gulf Stream which poured its indigo blue river through the greenish waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The momentum of the Gulf Stream could set back the progress of a South-bound ship by at least seventy miles per day. Small wonder that all ships risked martyrdom on the living coral which marked the barrier reefs, lying just a few miles off the shores of the Florida Keys.



THE WRECKERS

Many ships crashed the reefs, ripped open their hulls, and sank in the adjacent waters which might be thirty or even sixty feet deep. Ships, cargos, and passengers were lost. Thus there arose a need for stout men, with wit enough, brawn, courage, and solid investment in fast, trim, sturdy ships.

THESE MEN WERE THE WRECKERS OF KEY WEST. They risked their lives and their money in saving ships, fortunes, and the lives of others. For, they could not wait for "cahm" weather...their profession called them into the maw of every howling squall.

They were masters at sailing, navigating, and diving. Every wreck was another set of problems. They created spur of the moment solutions with the materials at hand.

A Conch says of his Granddaddy's tales of wrecking, "If they could back a ship off the reef in a rising tide, they'd take anchors out in-to deep water, and drop 'em. When the hooks wuz set, they'd take the rope ends back to the wrecked ship and secure the lines. Then, strong backs helped by the swing of an old sea chantey, they'd pull the ship off by sheer will and brute force. Believe you me...it wuz iron men in wooden ships thin. Now, we got iron ships and wooden men. Whina ship was becahmed if they had any sea bottom to work with, they pulled it for miles. Takin' two anchors ahead in a dinghy, droppin' em down, and lettin' the crew pull the ship up to the dinghy. We called 't 'Warpin'."

The headquarters for all wreckers interested in the crowded shipping lanes below Miami were in New Providence, the Bahamas, and Havana, Cuba, until 1828. In that year, a U. S. Court, with full jurisdiction over all maritime matters, was established in Key West. The court licensed the Wreckers; directed fees and settlements, and the sales of merchandise and ships. From the proceeds of these sales came fees, and the disbursement of money to the proper parties. For many years, a wreck a week was the average spoils from the sea.

Goods were stored in great warehouses. One measured 90 feet by 72 feet with floors of three inch by nine inch planks and walls of brick and concrete made with very large limestone aggregate. Merchandise that could stand the weather was stacked outside on the

ALONG THE WATER FRONT



6. Porter Dock Company's Wharf

7. A View From Trumbo

1. View From the Harbor.
2. View From the Harbor.
3. Boats at the Fish Market.
4. Coal Chute.
5. Mallery S. S. Co.'s Office and Warehouse.

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THE WRECKERS

wharfs.

Public notice of sales was posted, and all the inhabitants of Key West attended. Agents for marine insurance companies came from the United States, Cuba, Great Britain... their mission was to see that the auction was conducted well, for higher prices for the merchandise knocked down meant less money paid out to the insured. Speculators from New Orleans, Boston, and other great cities attended the auctions. Since anyone might bid in items at a Wrecker's Auction, the ladies and gentlemen of Key West were attired in the mode, and furnished their homes in a far grander manner than one might expect from the remote location of the island city.

Such diverse items were offered at the auctions, as to satisfy the whims and needs of anyone. Raw leather, hides, beautifully finished Moroccan leathers, baled cotton, flax, and jute, finished goods ranging from laces to silks and satins, rums, wines, and the sugar-colorings for rums, china, silver, feathers, elegant furniture, heavy machinery, glass and glassware. The list was endless.

Many of the Wreckers of New Providence migrated to Key West, after the establishment of the court. And some of the passengers who survived a wreck, stayed in Key West, and lived out their lives there, vowing never to set foot on a ship again!

In the nineteenth century, a million dollars equalled a billion dollars in status and buying power. There were many years, when the wrecking industry brought more than a million dollars to Key West. And some years, the traffic amounted to a million and a half dollars. With wrecking, cigar making, and sponging, the citizens of Key West were the wealthiest group in the United States, reckoned on per capita income.

Wrecking was not necessarily a full time industry. Wreckers had other professions and occupations. Even a preacher was numbered among this hardy group of men. It is told of him, that as he preached a sermon one day, a slip of paper was thrust in his hand. Glancing down at it, he read to himself, "A wreck on the reef." Descending from the pulpit, he strode sedately down the aisle, and reaching the doorway, he turned, "Let us pray, that the Lord may bless us

THE WRECKERS

this day... Amen... The congregation is dismissed. By the way... Wrack A-a-shor-r-r!" And he was off to his ship, showing his heels to the other wreckers thundering after him.

Jefferson B. Browne, a historian of the nineteenth century, presents an on-the-spot view of the competition to get to the wreck. (For, the first one to board the disabled vessel was Wrecking Master, and received extra shares of the awards by the Court.)

"A most thrilling sight... 20 or 30 sailing craft starting for a wreck... sails hoisted... jib and mainsail up, moorings slipped... vessels got under way with all the sail they could carry. Dashing out of the harbor, with a stiff wind... groups of threes and fours... they swung around the bend in the harbor off the foot of Duval Street... a scene never to be forgotten."

In 1852, the U. S. Government began to erect a series of light-houses. Beautiful lacy-like structures of wrought iron, they soared above the treacherous reefs, offering no resistance to winds or waves. Manned by devoted crews, they saved ships.

Although the great wrecking period had ended, licenses were still issued to the Wreckers, and a dying business carried on until December, 1921. On that date, the Wrecking License Bureau of the Court closed. It was the end of the Wreckers.

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THE HEMP FACTORY

By the end of the Civil War, the old hemp factory was a ruin, and just a memory to the old-timers who had worked in it.

I have found the barest reference to it in one book, published just after the war. In the book, the author was led to the ruins of the factory by an amiable ex-slave who had worked in it.

The present day Conchs of African origin remember the hemp factory through stories passed down through the generations. But, all the details have been lost. Six generations, at least, have come on to the scene at Key West, since the demise of the hemp factory.

The hemp factory was started because a market existed for American rope, and because the plant was so easily cultivated in Key West's evenly warm temperature. Three crops were raised each year. (It took four years for the plant to reach maturity.) This was not the true hemp which has a sugar cane type of growth, but a bristling, jutting cactus-type plant, called sisal hemp or Agave sisalana. It originated in the peninsula of Yucatan.

The famous Yankee clipper ships were rigged with American hemp rope. The clipper ships provided the market... and they destroyed the market. For they brought back from their voyages, cheaper fibers and desperately low paid fabrication of the fibers into finished products that retailed over the counter for less than it cost to produce rope and cordage in Key West.

One Conch told me, "My Mother said there is a lot of plants here in Key West left, they have long dark green stems with a poison point on the end. This leaf... is soaked in water until it becomes very soft. You must be very careful of the point of this stalk, it can be poisonous. The hemp factory moved back to Nassau. One of the ladies that lived in front of me told me her sister used to spin this rope."



CITY HALL,

Dedicated

The Old Hemp Factory had been torn down



KEY WEST.

y 4th 1876.

when the New City Hall was finished in 1876.

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

It was a dream... a lovely dream. And like all dreams, hammering it into reality took work, money, and dedication.

It was an old man's dream for Henry Flagler was seventy-five when he started the building of the Overseas Railway.

It was young men's work. Only men with vigor, strength, and the stubbornness of the young could fight Nature on her own terms every inch of the way.

It was Ohio money... oil money... money made from the Standard Oil Company. That, too, had been the dream of Henry M. Flagler, for his partner, John D. Rockefeller, gave him credit for the creation of the Standard Oil Company.

It was the dedication of these: the old man and the young men that dreamed out, thought out, and worked out the problems of stringing one hundred and twenty miles of railroad over little bits of land and the great expanse of Atlantic Ocean.

First a right of way through the far flung islands had to be secured. In the ponderous book known as Book S Deed Records, Monroe County Court House, Key West, Florida, there are several strategic pages of entries. Pages forty-four through fifty-three detail the gift of 50,890 and 74/100 acres of land. These legal records relate according to an act of the State Legislature, 1893, in order to provide an inducement for extending the railroad to New Smyrna, that for every mile of railroad constructed, 8,000 acres of land located within twenty miles of the railway line was to be given by the State of Florida to the Railroad Company. And that if the land in that area was not sufficient, any land belonging to the State of Florida could be used to make up the difference.

So, the 28 1/3 miles of railroad that had been laid to New Smyrna

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

secured the land which became the roadbed of the Overseas Railroad. The sale of this land was to become the only profit, for the railroad itself never made enough to meet expenses.

Though the land had been obtained, years of planning, surveying, and estimating had to pass, before actual work could begin. Rumors fed rumors. The people of Key West yearned to link their isolated island to the mainland. Key West sent delegations to Flagler. But, the finest salesmanship of the Key West envoys could not hurry Mr. Henry Flagler. He was a methodical man, willing to wait until he had all the reports from his engineers and associates.

Finally, ten years after the acquisition of the land and its recording in 1895, he decided to build the seagoing railroad. The year was 1905; he made a trip to Key West. There, he promised the leaders of the city that he would begin work immediately.

He had extended his railroad from Miami to Homestead. Although he had considered a route from Cape Sable, his engineers advised him to proceed from Homestead.

The task of research had been monumental: wind readings; depth soundings of the sea water; evaluation of the muds and rocks of the tiny islands, known as The Florida Keys; the testing of structural materials; the mapping of land, and the charting of the ocean; the obtaining of licenses from the national government to excavate and fill.

Flagler advertised in the leading newspapers of the entire nation, for contractors to build the railroad. Only one firm answered, and so Flagler decided to do it with his own engineers.

He had surrounded himself with young engineers to whom the challenge of the unusual and the daring meant as much as the good salaries which they received. There were R. Smiley, J. Meredith, W. Krome, E. Cotton, P. Wilson, S. Coe, university trained and wilderness toughened. Mr. Meredith was head engineer until his untimely death, from the overwork and stress of the railroad's birth. Mr. Krome succeeded him. All these men fought a daily battle with the elements and the problems of construction, with one goal in

mind... to finish the railroad before Mr. Henry Flagler died.

And the old man hung on to life with firm intensity... he wanted to see that first train puff into Key West.

The construction materials were ordered from all parts of the world. Steel reinforcing rods, spikes and hardware came from Germany. Belgian cement was shipped via the Mallory Lines of Key West. Gravel from the river beds came from the state of Mississippi. Wood ties were shipped from Georgia and Florida. Fresh water was hauled in to make concrete. When the workers ran out of fresh water, they used sea water to mix concrete and so the engineers discovered that salt water made excellent concrete.

Consequently, they began to mix the concrete for the bridges of the Lower Keys with sea water. The Roman Arch type bridges were built hollow. A man could crawl through them. However, after they were finished, the fresh water pebbles from the Mississippi were poured into the hollow spaces between the arches to bring up the level of the roadbed.

To hire workmen and to keep them was a problem. Living conditions in the camps were as good as they could be made. Clean camps were established on high dry islands, and on Quarters Boats. The cooks were selected for unusual ability in preparing nutritious and attractive meals. Food supplies were received several times each week from the main commissary, which was located first at Homestead, and later at Marathon. Supplies were of the highest quality. Fresh water was hauled by flatcar as far as the railroad tracks existed. Supplies also came by boat.

The drilled wells produced nothing but salt water, so even the water for concrete had to be imported. Later, salt water was used to mix the concrete.

The labor camps were unique in all history and any place in the world. NO DRINKING WAS ALLOWED. Henry M. Flagler, a strict teetotaler, had thrown his influence behind liquor prohibition. He did his best to reform his business associates, his friends, and his employees. He issued strict anti-liquor laws in all his camps. Booze

NO 26

QUARTER BOAT NO 5



Rubber Marathons Fla.

F. E. C. E. RAILWAY



NO. 25. DREDGE ROUGH RIDER, F.







3 UNLOADING TIES FROM BARGES TO TOP OF

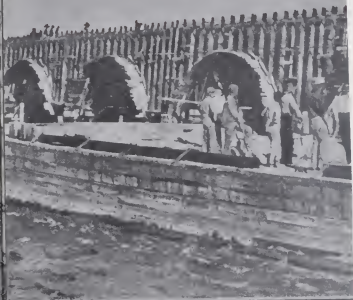


VIADUCT, LONG KEY, FLA. F. E. C. RY. EXTENSION

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THREE STAGES OF CONCRETE CONSTRUCTION



N, LONG KEY, FLA. F. E. C. RY. EXTENSION SERIES

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

boats found they could make wild profits if they could sneak into the railroad camps on the Florida Keys. But, the risk was too great. If caught, their reception was enough to take the edge off their greed.

Mosquitoes made things lively for everyone. It was a joke that if a man got drunk and went to sleep out doors, he was given a blood transfusion before he got his dismissal slip!

Health problems were dealt with in an intelligent and realistic manner. A small camp hospital was maintained by trained personnel. Serious cases were sent to Miami or Key West. All medical attention, as well as room and board, were free of charge.

Camp followers were forbidden. Families were encouraged to stay near the work projects, either permanently or on a vacation basis. Fishing boats and resort type entertainment were furnished to families of the workers.

As the railroad inched down the Florida Keys, it began to serve its own needs. Supplies still came by boat, but only if the railroad could not deliver. The massive construction equipment: the ponderous cranes, draglines, concrete mixers, earth movers, were mounted on barges.

There were day crews and night crews. Electric generators flooded the watery scene by night, and the work went on.

This marine world suited the Greek divers... the warmth of the sun, the small islands, the clear sparkling waters reminded them of their beloved homeland and they were a satisfied and loyal group of men. There was no turnover amongst them.

But, the isolation, the hardship got to many of the other workers, and the amount of dropouts was excessive. There were natives of the West Indies, workmen from the northern cities, and the mid-west, from Cuba, and from Spain. There were Irish, English, Scandinavians, and Negroes. The turnover was highest in the ranks of the men from the northern cities. They hated the heat, and the silence of the remote sea girdled islets. Without their fortifying liquor, they couldn't stand the hordes of insects and land crabs. They were oppressed by dread of the hurricanes and the

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

everpresent sea.

In despair, they cried, "Isn't this railroad ever goin' to git built?" And the taunting reply was, "No! It's a Marathon."

Dynamite sheds were built to house the explosives. Of solid coral and concrete, with walls more than one foot thick, the interiors were lined with double ceilings, walls, and floors of wood: a layer of wood against the solid stone, heavy joists, and another layer of wood sheathing. Three inch vents through ceilings and floors kept the dynamite cool. Solid iron doors, 3/16 of an inch in thickness, shielded the dynamite. At a reasonable distance from the dynamite sheds, a protective wall, of railroad ties, in a log-cabin like construction, rose six feet high, and four feet thick. The inside of the walls were filled with earth and coral rock.

Despite every precaution, men were injured as they drilled and forced the explosives into the drilled holes. Men were killed and mangled by the heavy construction equipment. Men were drowned. Men were swept away by hurricanes. However, no diseases ever were permitted to undermine the health of the men who built the Overseas Railway.

About 1909, 1910, young Ernest Perez, who worked in a drugstore run by Dr. Otto, accompanied Dr. Fleming to the foot of Margaret Street. Several barges had been anchored there. Their cargo was the most gruesome possible: heads, arms, legs, torsoes, the mangled bodies of 600 workers who had been killed in one big explosion. Grave-diggers dug one long grave along the fence at Grinnell and Angela Streets in the city cemetery, while horses and wagons were loaded with the remains of many brave men. The burial took place that night.

As William Albury said, "Today there is no sign where they were buried."

Mr. Perez recalls that during the 1909 hurricane several hundred workers who had come from New York, embarked on a barge that went out to sea in the hurricane. They were never seen again.

The islands from Key Largo to Little Torch Key were composed of



CONSTRUCTING FORMS FOR CONCRETE VIADUCT



CT LONG KEY FLA. F. E. C. RY. EXTENSION SERIES



5 COFFERDAMS FOR CONCRETE PIERS, LONG



KEY, FLA. F. E. C. RY. EXTENSION SERIES





THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

ancient coral reefs of a peculiarly hard dense limestone. This was the accumulated skeletons of trillions of tiny coral animals. The dredges bit into this ancient coral. It was dragged up as marl, an almost concrete-like, creamy-white substance. Railroad cars and barges hauled it to make road beds for the railroad. It was used as aggregate for the concrete bridges. The hard, dense coral wore out the dredge cutter heads. The saltiness rusted out the equipment. Everything wore out sooner than anticipated. Everything cost so much more than the projected figures of the engineers, and accountants. Money poured out in a great floodtide. One Key Wester said that Henry Flagler actually went broke a couple of times and had to borrow money to keep his dream-project going. Henry Flagler spent almost one million dollars for every year that the railroad would live. The total cost: twenty million dollars; the total life of the railroad... twenty-two years.

The three really long bridges in the chain lay in the realm of the extra hard coral reef. Long Key Bridge more than two and a half miles long; Seven Mile Bridge, whose name speaks for its length; Bahia Honda Bridge (Deep Bay in Spanish) one mile in length, and greater in height and depth than any of the bridges.

From Little Torch Key, Ramrod Key, Summerland Key, and Cudjoe Key, the bridges were less than a mile in length, including filled areas. From Cudjoe Key, the bridges were very small and few in number. The land from Little Torch Key to Key West was not of the dense animal coral. It had been created by tiny vegetables and was a softer limestone, known as oolite.

Most of the bridges were of the ancient Roman Arch type of construction. Although sturdy, they were artistic in appearance. Below the water line, massive footings jutted out. These were the coffer dams which had been filled with concrete to help shore up the bridges.

Spur tracks were built to provide fill or to make barge landings or docks. They were allowed to stand and rot down. The railroad elected to settle claims for subsequent damages to boats on a piecemeal basis. It was felt that this would be cheaper than trying to

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

pull up all the old piers.

The young men drove themselves... some to an early grave... trying to get the Overseas Railway completed before the "Old Man" died. They finished for his birthday. Three weeks later, he rode the first official train into Key West.

And what about the people in Key West? Well, for months they had planned decorations, and activities to celebrate this greatest of days. All the people in Key West... the Conchs... began preparing for the great day acomin'... the day when the first train arrived.

The main streets were festively decorated. The shop windows were dressed with great ingenuity. Shadow boxes had been created with small trains, bridges, and water. Miniature trains were the theme everywhere. Private homes were arrayed with flowers and palm fronds. People had arrayed themselves in their finest costumes and jewelry.

The first official train arrived in Key West, January 22, 1912. A locomotive pulled a coal tender, and five private cars. There were diplomats from Cuba, Mexico, Costa Rica, Uruguay, San Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, Italy, and officials from the United States. The Governor of Florida and the Mayor of Key West presented two gold plaques to Mr. Flagler. One came from the people of Key West, and one came from the workers who had built the railroad.

Mr. Flagler, who loved children and had a curious rapport with them, was delighted when a great chorus of young voices filled the air with song.

In the streets carnival workers shouted their wares. A carnival and a circus put on shows. The Navy arrayed its great ships in the harbor and held a ball in Mr. Flagler's honor. Each time he was introduced, the approving roar of the crowd arose. For, this one man with his vision and his own financing had connected Key West with the Florida mainland.

In 1913, The Florida East Coast Car Ferry Company, a corporation formed by Mr. Flagler, linked Key West with Cuba. The trains of the Seafaring Railroad were loaded on to huge ferry boats and shipped









This ferry carried railroad cars and cargo.





AND POST OFFICE.









the dignitaries who rode the first train to Key West.

THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

directly to Cuba.

The engineers who plotted the structure of the Overseas Railroad, planned for great winds. On every bridge was mounted an accurate and highly visible wind speed indicator. The engineers were furnished tables, and cautioned, that when winds reached a certain velocity, they were to decrease train speed across the bridges.

In 1935, the Labor Day Hurricane generated such gigantic waves, that the filled areas of the railroad were demolished. The bridges were perfect. They stood untouched. But, the damage to the road-bed rang the death knell for the Overseas Railway. Salvage men from Miami rode the torn up track in self-operated "hand cars." They submitted bids for the metal as scrap, but the bids were too small to be accepted.

Later, the Road Department of the State of Florida bought the right of way, including the scrap rails, and began to construct the Overseas Highway from Homestead to Key West. The narrow railway bridges were split, and widened by welding. To create an automobile bridge from the Seven Mile Bridge, the old rails were welded to form the new side rails.

The man in charge of this operation wrestled with the problem of the Bahia Honda Bridge. One night after dinner, he shouted, "I've got it! We'll lay the highway over the top of the Bahia Honda Bridge." Thus was born one of the world's most beautiful bridges. Pure expediency fashioned it.

When the railroad was in operation, the porters found it difficult to hold the foot stools for passengers to alight from the train, when these passengers lived on islands. The road bed slanted, and the marl was gravelly, and slippery.

When islanders ordered building materials shipped out from Key West, they often had to make their way from island to island picking up lumber, and cement bags that had been flung off as the train rushed on its way, for there were no stops except for passengers.

When land on some of the higher sand islands was offered for sale at \$20.00 per acre to railroad employees, their fellow workers scoffed

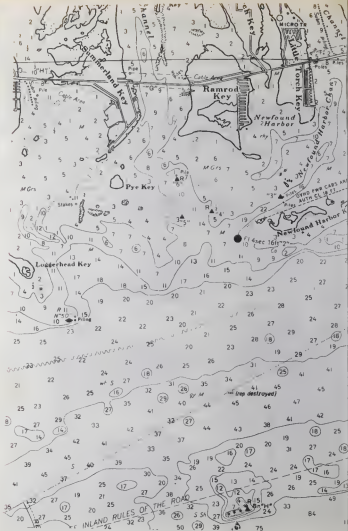
THE SEAFARING RAILROAD

at the idea of buying that "wuthless lan." Now, it is priceless.

ALONG THE FLORIDA EAST COAST RAILWAY



1. Key West
Tonnage.
2. Train Leaving
for the
Mainland
3. The Wonderful
Arches.
4. Train Crossing
the Water
5. One of the
Many Steel
Bridges



THE CIGAR INDUSTRY OF KEY WEST

Columbus and his sailors were the first Europeans to see crude cigars. Natives of the West Indies smoked cigars during their tribal ceremonies. In 1493, the returning adventurers carried cigars back to Spain.

The Spanish liked the small rolls of cured tobacco leaves, and called them "cigarros."

Of three types of tobacco, the flue-cured, fire-cured and air-cured, only one (the air-cured) is used in the manufacture of cigars. Dried in the sun, and stored in ventilated barns it is either shade grown, broad leaf or sun Sumatra.

Today, most cigars are made by machine.

But, when cigars were made by hand, back in the 1880's, 1890's, and early 1900's, the island city of Key West became the cigar making capitol of the world, and the island men enjoyed the highest per capita income in the United States.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Cuban rage at the harsh and alien rule of Spain gave birth to a revolution that culminated in the Spanish-American War.

During this period, Cubans with talent and money migrated to Key West.

They built a flourishing cigar making industry.

The small shops, consisting of an owner with eight or more cigar makers and a couple of tobacco strippers were called "Chincha" or "Buckeyes."

The moneyed men built huge factories. The largest was the Trust Factory, operated by the Havana American Tobacco Company. The three story building has been torn down. Three other factory build-

TYPICAL KEY WEST RESIDENCES





CIGAR

FACTORIES



1. Ray Lopez
Factory.
2. Cortez
Factory.
3. E. H. Gato
Cigar Co.
4. Havana-
American
Factory.

CIGAR Factories



5. Martinez-Hayden Company.
6. Geo. W. Nichol's Factory.
7. Principe de Gollo Cigar Co.
8. Mi Favorita Cigar Co.

THE CIGAR INDUSTRY OF KEY WEST

ings located at the corner of White and Newton Streets, on Fitzpatrick Street, and on Anne Street were burned, the victims of carelessness or spite.

A beautifully proportioned building, the Gatos Factory, was erected at Simonton Street. Still standing, it is now used by the U. S. Navy Commissary.

Another lucky building, that still stands on Staples Avenue, houses the Suddath Company.

Most boys had the choice of three jobs: fishing, sponging, and cigar making.

If he chose cigar making, a boy spent at least a year learning his trade. He spent one month opening the shutters, sweeping, dusting, and opening boxes.

There were permanent awnings on the sunny sides of the huge windows. But the great panes of glass were used only as a source of light. No windows were ever opened for air; neither were the doors. Never, were the fresh trade winds allowed to penetrate the great halls of the cigar industry. The fragile makings must lie undisturbed on the elevated benches of the cigar makers.

The traditionally trained cigar makers (men, always) made both right hand and left hand cigars. In the Tampa factories, where both men and women were cigar makers, they were trained to wrap one way, only. Some did only right hand wrapping, and the others did left hand wrapping. These workers were never able to hold a job in the Key West factories.

There was a caste system in tobacco. The Strippers received the lowest pay. The Banders received a little more. (Women generally held these jobs). The Cigar Makers were next in line. However, they could make very high wages because they could speed up their production. The Selectors were more highly paid, and the Pickers and Packers occupied the highest paid positions.

All the workers were paid on a piecework basis, so they could come and go as they pleased, as long as they did not abuse the pri-

CIGAR FACTORIES

M. PEREZ CO.
U.S. BONDED FACTORY



9



10



- 9. M. Perez Company.
- 10. S. & F. Florio's
Factory.
- 11. Miranda & Co.
(In process of con-
struction).
- 12. Key West Cigar
Factory.
- 13. Key West Cigar

THE CIGAR INDUSTRY OF KEY WEST

vilege.

The process of making, packing, and shipping cigars involved many steps: Tobacco arrived in bunches. Men wet the tobacco in tubs, and placed it in wooden bins, where it was left to condition. The Strippers prepared the inside filler by stripping the leaves half-way down the stem. They made the wrappers of the softest, most pliable leaves. These were pulled from the very end, and the whole stem was removed. After stripping, the tobacco was placed on boards which were 1 foot by three feet long. The leaves were smoothed, and another board placed on top to press the tobacco. The filler was sent to the department that handed it out to the cigar makers.

The wrapper was sent to the Selectors. These men, with perfect color vision, selected tobacco leaves by color value. The best color was "Maduro" or "ripe." Off colors ranged from light banana to very dark shades. Twenty-five wrappers were bundled into an earthenware yellow and brown crock, which was sent to a cigar maker.

The cigar makers sat at two tiered tables, and made cigars that were perfectly alike in every detail. They were paid according to grade, type, and amount produced.

The cheapest cigar, cheroot pina, brought \$15.00 per thousand, and could be produced at the rate of two hundred to three hundred per day. The most expensive cigars brought \$75.00 per thousand, and a good man could make fifty each day.

The cigar maker made his own cigars out of the seconds. He could smoke all day, and take some of the "smokers" home.

The finished cigars were sent to the pickers who worked literally surrounded by table surfaces. For a half moon had been cut out of each table, and every Picker stood within the half moon space, so that he could reach any part of the table. In the system known as "Spanish Picking," thirty-two shades of colors were used. For the top or face of the cigar box, the Picker carefully chose thirteen cigars alike in color and texture. The bottom layer was packed with twelve cigars, the next layer had thirteen, the third layer had twelve,

THE CIGAR INDUSTRY OF KEY WEST

and the top layer was beautiful with thirteen matched cigars, for a total of fifty cigars.

The box had been made of cedar wood, especially to keep worms and bugs out of the cigars. The covered box was placed in a press, and compacted so that the cigars looked square, instead of cylindrical. Then, the box was sent to the Banders.

The Banders took the cigars out of the box, laid them in order, placed highly ornamental bands of enamelled and gilded papers on the cigars, and repacked the box with precision. The inside lid of the box was ornamented so that when open in a glass cigar case, the trademark, brand, and name of the factory were prominently displayed.

Because all this work had to be done by natural light, the Pickers could not work on very cloudy days.

Inasmuch as the windows and doors were kept closed, working conditions could have been unbearable. But, the workers all donated money to hire men with loud, pleasant, clear voices. These men read the newspapers in Spanish, and interpreters transformed the Spanish into English for the Conchs who worked in the cigar industries. Such books as the Count of Monte Cristo were voted on, and were read, a few chapters per day. This whiled away the tedium, and filled minds with other thoughts than complaints about the heat and the humidity.

To ready the cigars for shipment, the small wooden boxes were placed in crates which were wrapped in waterproof coverings for all traffic out of Key West was by sailing vessel, until the railroad was completed in 1912.

A charming Conch, whose people have lived in Key West for generations, describes her observations of the cigar industry as follows: "Mother got up, and had breakfast ready for Daddy at 4 A.M. Daddy walked to work...well, everybody did, I guess, for no cigar factory could have been farther than one and one-half miles from its workers. Daddy wanted to get there by dawn. That way, he could be finished about 2:30 P.M. Any worker could enter the factory as



The cigar workers of Old Key West pa
They voted for such classics as "The
papers were also read in Spanish and
England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway,



d a "Reader" to keep them entertained.
ount of Monte Cristo". The daily news
nglish, for some of the Conchs were from
wedan, and some were from Cuba and Spain

THE CIGAR INDUSTRY OF KEY WEST

soon as there was light enough to see. He could quit whenever he wished."

"When they struck, they all struck, and the workers had to go as far away as Ybor City and Tampa to get jobs."

Another Conch, "The Selector was sort of a foreman. A good Selector was difficult to get and keep, so it was customary in time of strike to keep every Selector on the payroll, so as not to lose him to a rival factory."

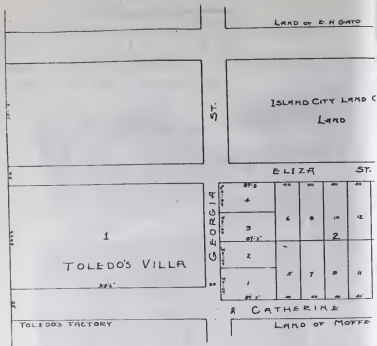
Today, the great cigar industry is a thing of the past in Key West. A few individuals still make custom cigars, or give demonstrations of the old techniques. A cigar maker's bench is on display at the East Martello Gallery. Now, cigars are made in other ways in other places.



Hotels



1. Hotel...
2. Hotel...
3. Hotel...
4. Hotel...



JAS A. WADDELL'S SUBDIVISION

LOT 1, SQ. 38

THIS SUBDIVISION TO TAKE THE PLACE
OF ONE RECORDED IN PLAT BOOK 1 P. 24



PETER T KNIGHTS DIAGRAM
OF

PART OF TRACT 14
ISLAND OF KEY WEST

DULY RECORDED DEC 6 1892

PETER T KNIGHT
BY J. R. Knight

COMPOISTURE AND THE ROAD HOUSE

"They're my lights ... I paid for them, and for the generator that runs them. If I want to play with those lights ... they're mine to play with!" The Road House Operator grinned as he shouted defiantly at the Federal Revenue Agents who stood rather meekly before him.

He knew that his pattern of lights blazing out across the dark ocean waters signalled safe arrival or cautioned delay to the rum runners who brought their cargoes from Cuba to Key West. And he knew that the Federal Agents knew also ... but proving it ... well, that was another matter!

His Road House was located on a fine natural harbor just out of Key West. Skillful carpentry and ingenious planning had transformed solid walls of the building into roomy storage areas for liquors such as rum, whiskey, brandy, champagne, aquavit, and liqueurs such as creme de cacao, creme d'ananas (pineapple), creme de cafe, creme de menthe. A liqueur, much desired by the thirsty ones of the Keys was locally called "Compoisture." It was made by immersing rock candy, orange peel and prunes with raisins in "Aguadent," and allowing the mixture to steep, until it had acquired a lovely ruby color, and delightful flavor, exceeding that of the best fruit brandies. (At least, this was the opinion of local devotees.) In one room, three exposed 2 x 4's (with nails set in) could be pulled out to release an entire 20 ft. x 10 ft. wall. Behind the wall, was a hidey hole two feet in depth. By crawling under the house, pulling nails, raising a trap door, another large storage space could be entered. This could accommodate boatloads of Scotch.

This was the Age of Prohibition, and the thirsty souls of Key West and the Florida Keys joined the rest of the United States citizenry in thwarting the law enforcement officials, and aiding and abetting the law breakers. With its hundreds of miles of unpatrolled ocean

COMPOISTURE AND THE ROAD HOUSE

and gulf frontage, the countless bays, and sluices, docks and harbors, smuggling liquor was no problem. Peddling liquor was no problem. It all came naturally.

The Road House Man loved beauty. Everything in his establishment testified to that fact. Softly glowing colored glass made an interesting corner display. Behind the attractive facade, was a niche, which hid the alcoholic supplies for the day's business. Good meals were served, and a fine hardwood dance floor invited fox trotting and tangoing couples. Marble top tables added a crisp note to the decor. The roulette and chuck-a-luck games were hidden... but they were available.

The Road House paid twenty-five dollars per month to certain persons. Protection from local legal intimidation was guaranteed. An additional bonus for the twenty-five dollar fee, was advance warning, whenever a group of Federal agents attempted to pull a raid on the liquor merchants.

The Road House Man had been tipped off that the Federal Men were going to raid his place at three A. M. He had a crowd of people at midnight. So, he got just one bottle of liquor out for them. He planned to close up at one A. M., and go to bed. "So, I'll be fresh for that three o'clock raid," he vowed to himself.

Just before one A. M., he heard the Federal Agents arrive. Hurriedly, he bolted the door.

"Open up, Joe," they called.

"Never," was his reply.

As they broke down the door, he scooped up the lone bottle of evidence, rushed into the dance floor area, and broke the bottle on a marble topped table. Then, he hurriedly took a towel, and mopped up the streaming liquor.

The agents destroyed his beautiful collection of stemmed glasses, crunching them along the marble bar. Handcuffing the Owner, they dragged him out of the Road House, and escorted him to the Key West jail. Other road house operators had met the same fate, and

COMPOSTURE AND THE ROAD HOUSE

together they dozed or bemoaned their fate, while the dark hours became the beautiful dawn time of Key West. The sheriff had been absent, all the while. He was very fond of "gully" eggs, and had gone to collect gull eggs from Dog Rocks. By nine thirty P. M., he had returned and released all the prisoners on their own recognizance.

The sheriff stopped the train, and searched it, trying to find the Federal Revenue Agents. But, they had been spirited out by boat, from Coast Guard Headquarters. (And from that time, the Federal men always arrived and departed by Coast Guard Boat. They never caught another train!)

For two years, the trial was delayed. However, at the end of the first year, all the people who had been raided, and brought into the jail, were gathered into a bunch, and twenty men were placed before them. They were asked, "Can you identify the men who were there? The men who raided you?" There were three counts of brutality against the Federal Revenue Men. One woman claimed that her back had been injured by their manhandling of her. One man had been beaten by the officers, for resisting arrest. One bootlegger claimed that his arm had been broken.

The time limit expired, and the entire case was thrown out of court.

The bootleggers installed heavier springs in the rear ends of their heavy cars, and meandered up to Stock Island, or to other islands, including No Name Key. They entered the premises with no load, so their cars' rear ends rode high. When they had received loads, the cars resumed a sleek appearance, and they wended their way back home. The runs were made at night or early morning, to avoid detection. And inasmuch as the travelling was done over many miles of the most deserted, and difficult terrain, the bootleggers and Road House Men earned their money, from the standpoint of sweat and blood.

Our Stock Island Bootlegger who had a dock and a chicken coop behind his Road House, surprised two Revenue Men in his chicken coop. He placed a hurried call to the police department. "Send me the sheriff," he demanded, "I've caught two men trying to steal my

COMPOISTURE AND THE ROAD HOUSE

chickens!"

Holding them with his shotgun, he waited for the sheriff, then watched with a straight face, while the Revenuers argued, explained, and finally retraced their path back through the Mangrove jungle, to their parked car, where they proved their identity, and secured their freedom.

As they crossed the bridge, and left the island, still under the watchful eyes of the sheriff, the Road House Owner flashed his lights. The upper and lower sets went on and off, on and off. Then all four sets went on at once. This was repeated three times. It meant "all clear" to the waiting rum runners. They could land any time, now.

"He's playing with his lights again," growled one agent to the other.

"Well, as he says, they're his lights," replied the other, who felt that his life might have been in jeopardy, and a change of occupation might be his wisest move.

The sheriff said nothing. He suspected that the light display was a signal to the people out there on the dark Atlantic. But, could he prove it? And, what good would it do, if he did prove it? "Oh, manana," he sighed. "I guess, he's entitled to do whatever he wants to with the lights on the front of his Roadhouse."

K. West, Fla. Roy Engel Light Factory





THE KEY LIME THEATER

Sixty miles west of Key West, the islands known as the Dry Tortugas simmered in a quiet sea. A huge red brick fort was erected on the island known as Garden Key. "Fort Jefferson" sprawled its massive walls, arched and castellated for strength, around the entire perimeter of the silent island.

During the War Between the States (known as "The Rebellion" in Key West), Fort Jefferson became an important prison for captured Confederate soldiers. (Later, Doctor Mudd, who ministered to the wounded Booth after he had assassinated Lincoln, was imprisoned here until he was released in gratitude for his splendid aid in a yellow fever epidemic.)

Prisoners, already half dead with scurvy were brought from other Federal prisons, and based in this sea-fenced jail. Their fate was certain... they would die. And yet here, a man fought Death, and won his battle. For, this man cared enough... the Surgeon... a creative man... a thoughtful man. And so he detailed men to search through the adjacent islands for any wild vegetables or fruits which might stave off the dread disease of malnutrition... lack of vitamin C... scurvy.

The search parties found a densely growing weed, purslane. Boiled and served with vinegar and pepper, it was a welcome addition to the stark prison fare.

Yet, limes were needed to get the scurvy ridden men on their feet, and to prevent the well from joining the sick.

Too, time hung heavily on the hands of men in the overcrowded prison. And, there were limes to be bought at Key West... other fruits and vegetables, also. If only they could raise the money to buy all the limes and other produce needed!

THE KEY LIME THEATER

The Surgeon issued a request for volunteers. He wanted anyone who could sing, or dance, or declaim, or play an instrument. He auditioned the volunteers and selected seventeen performers. Other willing men built seats for the audience, erected a substantial stage, and somehow procured a gorgeous drop curtain, on which were painted Fort Jefferson and the two light houses.

The evening of the first performance as the audience of prisoners who had paid the tiny admission sat in the semi-dark, one inspired man slit the curtains where the light house lanterns were painted, and placed lighted candles behind the slits. The effect electrified the audience into a storm of applause, and created a wonderful feeling of rapport between audience and performers.

It had been decided that the first production should be a minstrel show (though subsequent offerings were drama, variety, melodrama, etc.). Half of the artists were Negroes burned black by the sub-tropical sun...they needed no make-up for the minstrel show. But the rest of the performers were white men... they needed quantities of burnt cork.

Inasmuch as all the performers were from different parts of the country, they could impart the proper nostalgia to such songs as "Louisiana Lowlands Low," "Yellow Rose of Texas," "Suwanee River," and "My Old Kentucky Home." One daring lad performed melodies on a conch shell.

The really fine Band of the 110th New York Infantry (who comprised the Prison Guards) furnished beautiful string music and solo instrumentals.

A tumbling and weight-lifting team, known as "The Kerosene Brothers" were so habitually in trouble that during the day time, they were shackled with eight pound shot and chain (ball and chain). But, shortly before the theatrical evening began, their guards removed the heavy leg irons, and permitted them to warm up for their performance.

They had a delightfully professional routine. They did dives, head stands, mid-air flips. Then, they lifted heavy weights. The





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was dismantled and sent to Guantanamo, in Cuba.





Dr. Mudd's cell is close to this area.





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THE KEY LIME THEATER

climax of the act was frightening. One of the Kerosene Brothers lifted a fifty-six pound weight, and slowly began to twirl it at the end of a rope. Faster and faster, he slung the ponderous weight around his body, and finally hurled it out into the startled audience! The men almost stampeded in their efforts to dodge the projectile. But, when the massive weight hit the floor, it proved to be a cleverly decorated cardboard box! All the grunting and groaning of the Kerosene Brothers had been play-acting!

After several evenings of theatre, enough admissions had been collected to purchase all the Key Limes needed.

The five hundred men on sick list were placed in tents, where they could bathe in the fresh sea air. They were given fruits and vegetables, and put on a diet of Key Limes, three times per day! Within several weeks, this therapy had put all these men back on their feet, again.

Meanwhile, the mental stimulation satisfied the actors, stagehands, and audience. Time had gone a little more pleasantly and swiftly in the great Federal Prison in the blazing blue sea.

Old Fort Jefferson is deserted now, except for the men who live and work there, trying to preserve it, and the visitors from the Keys, and the mainland, and the sleek sooty faced Terns who fly there. But, the intrepid island spirit that inspired the off beat theatricals in the grim ocean-girded dungeon, pops up every now and then. Such, as the years of 1951 and 1952, when the Big Pine Prison Camp invited the very few people then inhabiting the Florida Keys to attend the weekly moving picture performances held for the entertainment of the prisoners. The delighted citizens were escorted out of their cars and shown to comfortable seats by the smiling prisoners. The little tips of money for this gracious hospitality helped buy many small items at the prison store. And the residents of the Keys were surely as entertained, as the lonely men in that far off time at Fort Jefferson!





ancient chart showing profiles of islands
as seen from sailing vessels off sea.

new land May on the first

A flow of water towards the north from the south

A great part of this extensive Bank is quite
dry at low water

dry bank at
low water

new land May

ISLANDS





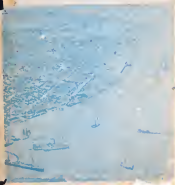
Wreckers and Workers of Old Key West

by Betty Brothers

Authentic Pictures Restored by J. H. Brooks



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Betty and Suwa

The facts for this book have been gathered by person-to-person contacts and painstaking research of old letters, books, diaries, historical references, court house and war - office files and records, ancient newspapers, and the specialized archives of the Monroe Public Library.

From 1946 to 1970, all items were collected and checked for accuracy. The writing of this book took two years.



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